

Stars and Constellations by **dragonartist5**

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Summary: An ongoing compilation of one-shots that follow the lives of Mike, El and the gang through love and loss, joy and sorrow.

1. The Blanket Fort

Two months after she left, his mom tried to take down the blanket fort. He came down the stairs, whistling tunelessly, and froze on the bottom step. He watched his as she picked up the folded blankets and began to carry them to the closet.

"You can't take it down." He said, swallowing. His voice didn't sound like his own.

"Michael . . ." She sighed, impatiently, not looking at him.

"You can't take it down." He repeated, clenching his fists so his fingernails bit into the skin of his palms. She finally met his gaze, and folded her arms over her chest. There was a glimmer of worry in her eyes, even fear, looking at her son.

He forced himself off the landing and pushed past her, pulling the blankets out of the closet.

"Michael . . ." Mrs. Wheeler pleaded, watching his frantic attempt to rebuild the fort. He whirled around, mouth twisting into an agonized grimace.

"She's still out there!" He yelled, and burst into tears. Mrs. Wheeler rushed forward, embracing her son. He didn't push her away. His whole body shook as he cried, drawing in great gasps of air.

"She's s-still out there and I nuh-need to find h-her. I need to find her . . ."

"Oh, Mike." His mom said, running a hand through his hair. "Oh, honey."

He cried until he couldn't cry anymore, and his mom held him, as if he were still a little kid. He sniffled and drew away from her. She touched his cheek, lightly.

Mrs. Wheeler never met the girl they called Eleven. The one who, unbeknownst to her, lived in the basement for the better part of a week. The one who held her son's heart, even in absence.

He swallowed, wiping his cheeks.

"Sometimes . . ." He said, and trailed off, staring at the ground. "Sometimes I feel like I still see her."

Mike bit his lip.

The lights still flickered, occasionally. Once. Twice. The lamp on his bedside table, the lights in the bathroom. And shadows moved. Shapes flickered in his peripheral vision, and winked out of sight whenever he turned his head.

Often, he felt a light touch of a hand on his shoulder or along his wrist, a change in the air, an energy. Electricity.

And he felt her thoughts. She was a presence in his mind, if not a presence in the room.

He kept his Super Com by his bedside table, and it hummed every so often, coughing faint static. If he listened hard enough, he could hear her. Breathing. Sometimes, she whispered his name.

She was a ghost in the walls and a presence in his mind. Her nearness drove him crazy, yet also pacified him. She was close, and safe. And he kept the fort up because he hadn't given up on her. Not yet. Not ever.

His mom put a hand on his shoulder and smiled. A sad, adult smile. He sniffed,

"We'll keep the fort up." She said, softly.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Later, after she tucked Holly into bed, Mrs. Wheeler came down the basement stairs. She peered into the fort and sighed.

Mike was curled up in there, fast asleep, one hand clasped around the Super Com, the other resting on his chest. She made to turn off the lamp, and stopped short.

A girl sat in the fort, beside her son. She was thin, with dark eyes and short, curly hair that looked to be dirty and matted. The girl looked at Mrs. Wheeler and smiled, sadly. Mrs. Wheeler opened her mouth, to say something to the girl. As soon as she had appeared, she was gone. Karen blinked, staring at the space beside Mike where the girl, Eleven, had been. She pressed a hand over her heart and leaned against the stair rail.

I'm losing my mind.

She told herself, drawing a shaky breath. Across the room, the lamp flickered weakly.

She crossed the room, glancing worriedly at Mike, who tossed fitfully in his sleep. She switched off the light.

2. Art Lessons

"Whatcha doin?" El said, peering over Will's shoulder. He jumped, twisting around to look at her. She plopped herself down on the couch beside him. She was wearing Mike's Hawkins Middle sweatshirt, and it was much too big for her. The sleeves hung way over her wrists, and the bottom reached past her knees.

El had been back from the Upside Down for a good three months, living at the Byers' house. She was still skinny, but the color had returned to her cheeks and some substance had filled in the gaunt, hollow places in her face. Her bones were no longer so prominent.

She blinked her large, brown eyes at him and frowned, looking at his paper.

"Are . . . are you writing?" She said, choosing her words carefully. His mom, Mrs. Wheeler, and Mr. Clark had been working together to make up for the time she spent at the lab. They weren't sure just what kind of education she had. It turned out, she could read, but at several grade levels below average. Her vocabulary wasn't great, but she was intelligent, and a quick learner. She read every day, now, burrowed under blankets or curled up in a chair on the back porch, a book clutched in her hands. She learned science and math from Mr. Clark, and Mrs. Wheeler helped her with History and English. She learned about Ancient China and the French Revolution and how to put together simple sentences on paper, the nature of verbs and adjectives and all that grammar junk they usually learned in first grade.

"No, I'm drawing."

"Drawing?"

"Yeah. I take my pencil and I draw shapes, and they look like things in real life."

"I used to draw, too. Sometimes. Back . . . back in the bad place." She said, picking up the piece of paper. She held it up, squinting.

"Who is it?"

Will smiled, sheepishly.

"It's you."

"Me?" El said, quietly, gazing at the drawing. She quickly set it down, trying to conceal the trembling that had started in her fingers. She ran her hands through her hair.

"Yep. It's a portrait."

"Portrait?" She repeated, turning the new word over on her tongue.
"What's a portrait?"

"It's a drawing of a person."

"It's good."

"Huh?"

"The drawing. It's good."

"Thanks." Will said, staring at his paper.

"Will you teach me? To draw?"

Will looked at her, cocking an eyebrow.

"Really?"

El nodded.

Pretty soon, colored pencils and markers were littered all over the coffee table. El sketched away, tongue pinched between her teeth, attempting to draw the Byers' dog, Rover, from life. The dog lay on the floor beside them. He cocked his head, saliva dripping from his tongue in strings. He wagged his tail and put his head between his paws, happy to keep watch over the youngest inhabitants of the Byers' household.

After she finished, she held it up for Will's inspection. He nodded, encouragingly.

"It's good. It's really good, El."

She beamed at him.

She set her paper aside, picked up a blank one, and started to sketch out a drawing of Mike. She liked Will's portrait, and decided to try one herself. And what better person than Mike, because she knew his face the best. She knew his eyes, dark and kind and safe. She knew his freckles, the constellations that dotted his cheeks, his nose. She knew the slope of his nose, the curve of his brow and lips, the waves of dark hair that fell across his forehead.

Once she finished, she set the portrait aside and picked up another paper. She paused, holding her pencil above the blank page, thinking. She bit her tongue, steeled herself, and touched the tip to the page.

When she finished, she stood up, breathing heavily. A thousand emotions conflicted and collided inside her. Drawing wasn't supposed to make you feel this way. Will glanced at her, then at the paper.

There, on the page was the Demogorgon, claws outstretched, flower-petal maw gaping open. Will sucked in a breath, staring at El.

"El . . ."

"Do you see it, too?" She said, quietly, still staring at her drawing. Will glanced between the drawing and El, and clenched his fists.

"Every night, when I close my eyes." He whispered, taking her wrist. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry." She sniffed, mouth twisting into an agonized grimace.

Will shook his head, looking at her.

"It helps, to draw the monsters. Then they're not stuck in your head so much. They're easier to deal with when they're on paper. See?" Will said, pulling his sketchbook towards him. He opened it. El gasped. Hundreds of drawings, mostly the demogorgon. There were other monsters too, all teeth and claws and rolling eyeballs. They spilled over the pages. The whole book was filled with them. She took it on her lap and touched the drawings with her fingertips,

turning the pages.

"Will?"

"Hmmm?"

"I'm a monster."

"What? No, you're not, El."

"I am." She said, and burst into tears. Will hugged her, and she clutched his shirt, her body shaking.

"I'm a monster. I . . . I huh-hurt people, W-Will."

She sniffed, staring at Will's portrait.

"No, El. You're not a monster. I didn't draw you because I'm afraid, I drew you because I love you. Because you're my sister. Because you're a good person, see? You don't have to draw monsters. You draw things you like. People you love." He took the sketchbook off of her lap and flipped to the back. There, several pages were completely covered with drawings of beautiful things. A horse, a flower, a sun peaking through clouds. And more portraits, of Jonathan and Joyce, Hopper, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas. Her friends. Her family. El touched the drawings and laughed through her tears, smiling at him.

"You're not a monster." He said, ruffling her hair. And El believed him. Because Will's gentle pencil strokes made her beautiful.

His pencil strokes made her into something more than Experiment 011.

3. I'll Stay, For You

The pale sunlight throws a whole spectrum of colors over the rain-dappled windshield, like a spilled paint can or a cloth woven with a thousand, kaleidoscopic threads. Colors that shift and dance and smear together. It is late in the afternoon, and the rain has finally stopped after a monotonous rage that refused to relent for the better part of a week. The asphalt is damp, the sky dotted with clouds but not overwhelmed by them.

El fidgets in her seat, gripping the steering wheel with one hand. The other taps out an irregular beat on the fabric of her jeans. Mike watches her fingers as they twitch and tremble. He pays careful attention the sloping curve of her wrist and the furrows of her skin, committing each detail and inflection to memory. His eyes flick to her face, roving over her arched brow and the bridge of her nose and the lighted impatience in her eyes.

She feels his eyes on her. Heat rises in her cheeks. She leans forward, fiddling with radio to draw his eyes away from the blush that stains her face. The radio is belligerent, fading in and out of static.

Her eyes remain fixated on the road in front of her, though he knows her mind is elsewhere. She almost runs a red light, catches herself at the last moment. She chews her lip in apparent frustration, giving her head a slight shake. Mike, concerned, reaches for her free hand. He folds it in both of his own, tracing circles over the furrows and wrinkles, over her slender fingers and bony knuckles.

Her hand is warm, but it fidgets like the rest of her, ruled by flighty temptress. It pulses like the bass of some familiar song, the sound that reverberates inside your chest and knocks every bone against one another, plucking your veins like guitar strings. Like a heartbeat or butterfly wings.

Her eyes meet his for a split second, before returning to the road. He doesn't let go.

"What're you thinking about?" He says, softly. The edges of her eyes crinkle. The corners of her mouth turn upward, offering him a forced

sort of smile.

"A lot of things." She offers, not looking at him. He doesn't say anything.

"Summer. You, leaving for college."

Mike swallows, lets go of her hand. His expression turns stony. She looks at him, her plastic smile fades. She bites her lip, cursing herself for bringing it up. They haven't spoken about it much. The topic is painful, leaves a bitter taste on the tongue. They figure it's best to ignore it, pretend like it's not going to happen until it actually does. It's on their minds, though. Constantly.

Mike searches for words, but they dance out of his reach. El's grip tightens on the steering wheel, her knuckles become bloodless. Paper white, paper snowflakes.

"We still have a couple months." He says, and his voice is weak. It's a pathetic response, and one that doesn't make either of them feel better. "And I'll call you, every night. And I'll write. Don't worry, El, I'll find lots of ways to annoy you."

"It's not the same. A phone call, a letter, isn't the same." She says, and swallows hard.

"I'll stay." He says, looking at her.

"I'll stay. Say the word, El, and I'll stay." He says. "I'll take classes at the community college. Night classes. And I'll work during the day. I'll save up. And someday, I'll get us out of this town. We'll go to Indianapolis, or New York. Anywhere away from all the bad stuff in this place."

El jerks the steering wheel, pulling the car to the side of the road. She parks and leans back, unable to keep the tears from spilling over her eyelids. Once the tears begin, they don't stop. She presses her hand over her mouth, and a strangled cry escapes her lips.

Mike reaches across the seat and wraps his arms around her.

"El . . ."

"I'm suh-sorry." She chokes. "I don't want you to st-stay. I want you to g-go to c-college and s-see the w-world and I want y-you to be h-happy."

"El—" Mike starts.

El shakes her head, furiously.

"No. You need to go. And when you graduate, I'll be here. I'll wait for you. And we can get out of this town, if you want. If you still want . . ." She swallows, looking at him.

"If you still want me."

Mike kisses her, hard. El's runs a hand through his hair, doesn't try to pull away. It's Mike who finally breaks the kiss, and when he pulls away, he's crying.

"I'll always want you, El. I know that. I know I'm young and stupid and people probably think I'm out of my mind. But we're supposed to be together." He says, sniffing.

Maybe he is crazy, so what?

He wipes at his eyes.

"We found each other in the woods for a reason, El. And if people can't see that, screw them. But I love you, and I won't stop loving you, alright? When are you going to get it into your head, El? I love you." He kisses her again, softer.

"I love you I love you I love you." He's saying it over and over again, and she's saying it back.

Darkness is falling fast. El pulls the car back onto the road, one hand on the wheel, one clutching Mike's hand. She takes a deep breath, pulling her scattered pieces back together. They arrive at the Wheeler house, and Mike embraces her on the porch. She inhales, burying her face into his jacket, losing herself in his presence, in the scent of him.

For now, it's enough.

4. King and Lionheart

Mike squeezes his eyes shut, bracing himself for another blow.

"What's wrong, Wheeler? Don't like your face? Here, let me fix it." Troy taunts, his voice high and cold and cruel. He drives his fist into Mike's mouth, knocking him back against the cold metal of his locker. Mike cries out, eyes rolling. He blinks, and black spots burst over his vision. The light seem to dim, grow bright, and dim again. An excruciating pain blossoms from his mouth. His tongue finds his front tooth, and his eyes widen as he realizes a piece is missing.

A gale of laughter rises from Troy's band of hooligans. Mike struggles to remain upright. His hands curl into fists, so much that his fingernails bite into his palms. He's shaking.

"Stop." He says, thickly. He's vaguely aware of the blood that fills his mouth, mixing with saliva.

"Stop?" Troy says, laughing madly. "Stop? Look around, Wheeler, you think anybody's gonna show up to save your ass? Nobody's gonna stop me, unless, of course, you wanna try?" He laughs, turns to his friends. James and Danny and the rest of the gang snicker, glaring menacingly at Mome. "Betcha Frog Face can't throw a punch to save his life."

Mike, wincing, tears blurring his vision, takes a step forward. He takes another step, forcing himself to meet Troy's eye. James sticks out his foot and trips him. Mike falls flat on his face. Somebody kicks him in the shin, the ribs. He lies there, choking on his tears, hating them. Hating himself, for being weak, for being a crybaby. Wishing he could be brave like the Avengers or the X-Men.

Abruptly, the blows subside, and Mike twists around to see a teacher, Mr. Patterson, barging through the door, red-faced and screaming. Troy's gang take off, screaming "Freak!" over their shoulders as they flee the room, laughing gleefully. Mr. Patterson wags a fat finger at them and turns to Mike.

"You alright, boy?"

"Yeah." Mike says, wincing as he stands up.

At home, his mom will clean his busted lip and scraped face. Mike will tell her he fell off his bike, because he can't bear to tell her the truth. He'll go to his room and bury his stinging face in the pillows and let the tears fall, because it's better to cry here, alone.

He'll grow to be brave. He'll look Troy in the eye and stand up, beside his friends, and take the blows. He'll meet a strange girl with a strange past, and she'll teach him what it means to be brave. For real.

He'll learn that the scariest thing isn't facing those bullies or even the Demogorgon, but falling for her. And he's falling fast.

He'll hold her hand as they run for their lives through school hallways, he'll watch her risk her life to save theirs.

And someday, she'll come back to him. He'll hold her while she cries, and he'll worry he's not strong enough, not brave enough. Because she's so strong, so brave, and so much more than he deserves.

But she makes him brave, and strong, and so much more than the sum of his parts.

Right now, though, he's only ten. He stands and wipes the blood from his lips and shrugs his shoulders and puts on a brave face. And late that night, buried under the blankets, he'll let the tears fall.

Because there's strength in tears, too.

5. Home for Christmas

A/N: This is literally 100% fluff. Sorry not sorry.

El pauses in the midst of tying the ribbon on a package and stares at the door, chewing her lip. Nancy glances at her and sighs, patting El on the shoulder.

"He's not supposed to get here until two, El. It's only twelve-thirty. Relax."

"I know." She says, giving her head a shake.

"I just . . . miss him. I haven't seen him in months."

Nancy nods, smiling sadly.

"I know. Just a little longer, okay?"

"Okay."

El picks up the scissors and cuts another strip of ribbon. Nancy sighs again, rubs a hand over her belly. She's four months along, pregnant with her first child. El looks at her.

"How's the baby?"

"Good." She smiles, looks down at her growing bump. "I think it's a boy." She says, voice dropping to a whisper.

El looks away, ties the ribbon.

It's a girl.

El resists the urge to say it. But she can tell. She can feel it. Even this early, El can pick up faint streams of consciousness, flickers. She doesn't try to get into the baby's head, of course. She can just . . . feel it. It's like the baby's putting out weak radio waves, and El happens upon them when her own thoughts are quiet.

She sets the wrapped package aside and picks up the next gift—a sweater, for Mike—and begins to cut a large square of red wrapping paper patterned with reindeer.

It's December twentieth, and Mike's coming home for Christmas. Excitement bubbles inside of El like a bird's wings, a sudden upset, a nervous beating. She takes a deep breath tucks the sweater in a cardboard box, then begins to draw the paper around the package. She throws another glance at the door.

Nat King Cole sings "The Christmas Song", and the smell of peanut butter cookies floats from the kitchen. El closes her eyes, recalling her first proper Christmas.

She spent it here, at the Wheelers. She remembers the overwhelming happiness, the pure joy. The smell of cookies, the snowball fights, the pretty lights, which looked better on a tree than nailed to Joyce's wall, in her opinion. She remembers the shy blush on Mike's freckled cheeks as he gave her the first Christmas gift she'd ever received: a Fleetwood Mac Vinyl, and a turntable to play it.

She remembers how he started talking, words getting all knotted and twisted up in his mouth, as she opened it. He explained what it was for and what album it was, and rushed to help her set it up, leaving his own pile of gifts on the floor, long forgotten. They lay on the floor, on their backs, hand in hand, and listened to the entire album.

After it was over, El got up off the floor, moved the needle, and started the record all over again. She returned to her place on the floor, and Mike was staring at her in a way that made her all floaty and warm inside. And she kissed him, without really knowing exactly what it meant, though she had an idea. Later, she'd ask Nancy to elaborate. But for now, what she felt was real, and she figured kissing Mike was the best way to express it. They were thirteen.

He blushed, face and ears turning bright red, making his freckles stand out even more, somehow. And it only made her want to kiss him more. This time, on the cheek.

He sat up, face burning, staring at her as if he was afraid she'd disappear into thin air.

"El?"

"Mike?"

"Uh . . M-Merry Christmas." He stammered, and smiled.

She smiled, took his hand.

"Merry Christmas, Mike."

Holly pads into the room, carrying a plate of cookies.

"Hungry?"

"Always." Nancy says, gratefully, and takes a cookie. Holly settles herself next to El and offers her the plate. El takes a cookie and nibbles on it, smiling at Holly.

"Wanna help?"

"Sure." She says, and sets to work wrapping another gift.

El stands up and stretches, then bends down and picks up the finished packages. She carries them to the tree and stacks them neatly on the carpeted floor, beneath its branches.

The doorbell rings. El hurries over to get it.

El opens the door, and and she is immediately engulfed in six feet of Dustin. He throws his arms around her and picks her up, spinning her around in a circle. She laughs, and he sets her down again.

"Ellie!" Dustin yells, beaming.

"What're you doing here?" She says, happily.

"I came home a day early, to surprise Mikey." He says, then turns as Holly rushes up to him and hugs him.

"Hey, Holls! Jesus, stop growing. How old are you, now?"

"Fifteen." She says, giggling.

"Oh. My God. I remember when you were three, and we used to dress you up for our campaigns. God, those were the days. I'm getting old."

"You're only twenty-one."

"Yeah, and then all of a sudden you're forty and gross and old. We're halfway there, Ellie. Christ." He shakes his head. "And Nance, the first one of us to actually grow another human being. How're you feeling?"

"I'm great, Dustin. It's good to see you." Nancy says, and hugs him.

"When is Mike's estimated time of arrival?"

"His train gets in at one-thirty. He should be here around two." El says.

"Oh, good. That leaves us just enough time to get some food. Who's hungry?"

...

They drive to a restaurant across town. They get a booth seat in the corner.

"So, I want to hear about everything. How's life in Hawkins? How's Jonathan? How's everyone?" Dustin says, enthusiastically.

"Jonathan's good. We're still in New York. I flew in a week ago, but Jon went to pick up Joyce. She's living in Indianapolis. They're driving down tomorrow. They should be here by the afternoon." Nancy says.

"And Baby Byers? Boy or girl?"

"I don't know. I think we're going to wait and see. We wanna be surprised." Nancy says, and smiles. "Jonathan doesn't want to be surprised, but I think it's more fun to wait, ya know?"

Dustin grins.

"That's so exciting. I'm so fucking happy for you guys." He glances

sideways at Holly. "Sorry. One more dime for the swear jar."

Holly giggles.

"And Ellie, what about you?"

"I'm still taking classes at the community college. I'm helping out at the police station a lot, too. I think Hopper likes the company."

"I'd think he would've retired by now."

El shakes her head.

"No, he's only happy if he's busy."

"Holly? How's high school?"

"School's boring, but we just had the Snow Ball. That was pretty fun."

"Oh man, the Snow Ball. Jeez, those were the days."

El nods, swallowing. Her memories of the Snow Ball are bittersweet. It was great, because Mike was there and they spent most of it kissing. That night, though, Will was so sick . . .

She pushes the thought from her mind.

It was years ago.

And it still hurts.

Dustin sits back, smiling.

"Oh man, I fricking love you guys."

El laughs.

"We love you too, Dustin."

A waitress with short, dark hair and dark eyes approaches the table.

"Can I get you any drinks, to start?"

"Yeah, I'll have a Dr. Pepper." Dustin says.

Nancy and Holly order waters, and El gets a Sprite. She sips it, letting the bubbles melt on her tongue.

"What about you, Dustin? How's Michigan?"

"Cold." Dustin says, and laughs. "It's fricking cold. But classes are good. The girls are cute."

"Girlfriend?" Holly asks, wiggling her eyebrows.

"I've had a couple, but they didn't stick around. Right now, I'm single and ready to mingle." Dustin says, and grins.

"You just need to find someone that appreciates your humor . . . and your appetite." Nancy says.

"I don't know. That might be an impossible feat." He says, laughing. He turns to El. "Enough about me, what about you, El? When's the wedding?"

"Shut up!" El says, smiling.

Dustin raises his arms in mock surrender.

"Just sayin'. It's inevitable. You and Mike have been, like, super in love since you were thirteen. It's gross."

The waitress, Veronica, brings the drinks, then opens her pad of paper.

"Ready to order?"

"Yeah, I'll have the biggest burger on the menu." Dustin says, massaging his stomach. El laughs.

"What? I'm starving."

. . .

El drives them home, and Dustin cranks up the radio super loud and belts a song by Depeche Mode until they're begging him to stop. El pulls into the driveway and parks the car. The four of them troop up

the steps and into the house. They pile onto the couch in the living room to watch Home Alone, and Nancy continues wrapping gifts. El moves off the couch and onto the floor to help her.

On the T.V., Kevin is watching the scene from "Angels With Filthy Souls", and El is tying a gold ribbon around a gift for Mrs. Wheeler when the door opens. She whips around and jumps to her feet. Mike shuffles through the door, carrying a suitcase in his arms. He meets her eyes, and drops the suitcase. He opens his arms, and El walks straight into them, throwing her arms around his neck.

"I missed y—"

She kisses him, hard, on the mouth, stopping his words. And he kisses her back, holding her, and there are tears in his eyes that he doesn't make any effort to wipe away. El pulls away, beaming.

"I missed you, too." She says. He laughs, and kisses her forehead.

Dustin pushes past crushes Mike, in a hug.

"Dustin! How's it going, man?" Mike says, smiling broadly.

"I'm grand."

"Mikey!" Holly cries, and launches herself into his arms.

"Hey, Holls." Mike says, happily.

Nancy shuffles over and hugs Mike. His eyes drop to her growing belly and he smiles, eyes widening.

"How's Baby?"

"Baby's good. I'm tired, though. All the time. And hungry."

Mike laughs.

Dustin stoops down and picks up Mike's suitcase.

"I'll get this upstairs."

He carries it out of the room, whistling timelessly. Mike turns to El,

brushes a thumb along her cheek. She catches his hand and presses it to her lips.

"I love you." Mike blurts out, then turns bright red.

"I love you, too."

"Oh my god, stop being so adorable, it's making me sick." Nancy says, rolling her eyes.

"Now shoo, and let me finish wrapping presents."

. . .

El drags Mike to the basement, taking him by the hand, pulling him down the steps. He takes the last step too fast, and almost falls face-first on the floor. El tries to catch him, blocking his fall with her body, but he's too heavy and they both crash to floor in a tangled heap.

Mike laughs.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." El groans. She disentangles herself and stands up, offering her hand.

She pulls him to the center of the room and stops, clutching his hand.

There are tears in his eyes as he gazes around the room, much smaller than he remembered, even after a few months.

"D&D for, like, ten hours every weekend." He says, delighted, tracing his finger along the grain of the wood table.

"Twelve on Saturdays." She reminds him. He laughs and begins to rummage around for their playing board. He fishes it out from under a pile of old cassette tapes and lays it on the table. El touches the board with her fingers. They haven't played in years.

Mike looks at it, sighs, and turns away. He throws himself on the couch. El settles herself beside him, so they're both stretched out, side

by side.

"This is where you tried to change in front of us and Dustin freaked out."

El grins, recalling that day.

. . .

"My name's Mike. Short for Michael." The boy says, gently. She can't stop the trembling. Her fingers shake. She tries to find words. Her limited vocabulary lodges in her throat. She sees red. She is suffocating.

Thunder claps in the distance. It sounds like gunfire. She jumps a little, and the panic makes her eyes water.

"Maybe we can call you 'El' short for Eleven." He says. She tries to focus on his face, and the little dots that pattern his cheeks. His eyebrows furrow, and a peculiar expression hides in his eyes. She holds her breath.

Okay.

She wants to say it. She wants to thank him. She wants to tell him she's grateful. He saved her life, even though he doesn't know it.

She likes him better than the others. The others are loud and overbearing. She winces inwardly at the thought of them coming back here, barging in, arguing loudly amongst themselves.

He is gentle and quiet. He seems to understand, at least a little.

She feels her muscles relaxing slightly. She takes a breath, returning his gaze hesitantly. She fights the instinct to stare at the floor.

His eyes are deep and dark. Safe.

"Well, um, okay." He says, fidgeting. Her fingers twist into the blue sweater that he gave her. It smells like him. Anything to stop the shaking.

"Night, El."

She chokes on the words before they leave her lips.

"Night, Mike."

. . .

Mike stands up, grabs her hand, and walks to the other side of the room.

"This is where your fort was." He says. Her smile disappears. Her grip on his hand tightens.

"Dustin told me you kept it up, you know, after I left." She says. He looks at her, leaning his cheek against her forehead.

"Of course I did." He says, quietly. His breath stirs the hair around her ears. Upstairs, they can hear Dustin singing "Jingle Bell Rock" loudly.

"Why?"

"I must've loved you a whole lot, even then." He says. She can feel his smile.

"You did."

El looks at him.

"I keep thinking about that day. Even now. It's been eight years, Mike. I still think about it all time."

Mike nods.

"Me too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I keep thinking about how goddamn lucky I was to be out in the rain that day."

. . .

They rebuild the fort. Two twenty-one-year-olds, college students, building a blanket fort while snow begins to fall outside and muffled Christmas carols float from the upstairs radio.

Mike steps back to admire his work. El climbs into the fort, and Mike follows. It's too small for them, now. El folds her legs up to her chest to make room for him. Mike manages to fit his entire torso inside, but his legs stick out. El laughs, presses a kiss to his forehead.

They lay down, not talking, enjoying the closeness and the comfortable silence. El can just hear his gentle inhale and exhale over Dustin's rendition of "White Christmas".

"Mike?" El whispers, after a while,

"Hmmm?" He had begun to doze off.

"Can we stay here?" Her voice is small, like a child's. He nods, eyes closed.

"Forever, if you want."

"Okay."

El stares at the blanket ceiling, wrapped in the arms of the same freckled boy that pulled her out of the rain and gave her a jacket and later, a name. They're quite a bit older, and life is different, but the fort's the same. He's the same. And right now, that's all that matters.

El burrows into the folds of his sweatshirt and drifts off.

6. Present Tense

Mike stands beside Will, staring at the small, wood cross buried in the dirt. The cross marks a grave without a body, a small reminder of the strange girl that inexplicably, miraculously stumbled into the woods near Mirkwood on a cold, rainy night in November.

Mike resented the idea of a funeral, a memorial.

If we have a funeral, it means we've given up on her!

He spit the words in Hopper's face, choking back the tears, his grief manifesting into rage. He gave in, though, because Hopper and Joyce insisted, because *what else is there to do?*

He hasn't let himself cry, not since the night she disappeared. As they stand in a small, silent circle, staring at the cross, it bursts out of him, angrily, almost violently. He wipes furiously at his eyes as the tears slip down his pale, freckled cheeks. Will touches his arm. Dustin puts a hand on his shoulder. He takes a deep breath, trying to pull his shattered pieces back together. He tries to be brave, strong.

The tears fall onto the crinkled paper clutched in his hand. Scribbled across the paper, under the tears and the bleeding ink, a eulogy.

The Chief clears his throat, reaches to pat Mike's shoulder, gently.

Mike takes another breath and squeezes his eyes shut.

"El . . . she . . ." He begins. His voice trembles, dips. He sniffs, wipes his nose with his sleeve.

"El saved us." He gets out, and swallows. He glances at the paper, then at the cross. The wind sweeps through the tree branches, bare as bones. His breath hitches, gets snarled and tangled in his throat. Under the wind and the ruffling of dead leaves, her voice reaches his ears, shrouded in the larger silence.

Mike . . .

"El saved us. She's brave. She's smart." He pauses, takes another

breath.

You're still present tense.

"She knows. . . things. More than any of us could know, and she helped us. If . . . if it weren't for her, Will wouldn't be here, and . . ." He sniffs, staring at the ground. "And she's not . . . not g-gone. She's still out there, and I h-haven't given up on her." The tears fall thick and fast, now. The paper is reduced to a crumpled ball in his fist.

"Mike . . ."

"She's out there, somewhere. Alone. But she's alive. I know. I *know* she's alive."

He crosses some line. Something breaks, inside him. And someone, his mother, wraps him in a hug. He weeps, tears squeezing out of closed eyelids, mouth twisted in an agonized grimace. Vaguely, he wonders how it's possible to feel so much, to hurt so deeply for someone he barely knew.

But he knew her. He trusted her.

Maybe he's too young, to feel so much.

But he loved her.

He knows her. He trusts her. He loves her.

Because she's still present tense, to him.